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Revitalizing the Rialto Theatre could be problematic

By Erick Galindo, Staff Writer

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South Pasadena's chamber of commerce is looking at options for the red-tagged Rialto Theatre. Revitalization of the downtown establishment is becoming popular among city residents, but could be problematic because of the Rialto's historic designation and a soon to expire 99-year lease Thursday, September 29, 2011. (SGVN/Staff Photo by Walt Mancini)

Photo gallery: Historic Rialto Theatre SOUTH PASADENA - Saving the Rialto Theatre - a cause célèbre among city residents - could be problematic as the 86-year-old theater's historic designation and 99-year lease have created a revitalization quagmire.

"There are a number of problems that we face in finding a solution to this quagmire," said Scott Feldmann, South Pasadena Chamber of Commerce CEO. "But I remain hopeful that something can be done."

The last time the public got to set foot at the Rialto Theatre, 1023 Fair Oaks Ave., was for a showing of Errol Flynn's 1938 "Robin Hood" in early 2010, according to www.rialtosouthpasadena.com. It was shuttered May 2010 and red tagged for failing building and fire safety inspections.

Almost two years later, a movement has begun to save the deteriorating landmark. From 3 to 5 p.m. today in the South Pasadena Community Room, 1115 El Centro St., the chamber will present a symposium titled "Encore! Rialto" on the many problems and possible approaches to revitalization Rialto.

Attendees will hear from experts who have brought back historic theaters in their own

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communities, including The Orpheum Theatre in Los Angeles, The Alex in Glendale and The Fox in Pomona.

A short documentary about the Rialto by South Pasadena

High School student filmmaker Miranda Gontz, 17, also will be shown.

"The Rialto - A Fading Treasure" provides a brief history of the Rialto using historic photos, period footage and interviews with Feldmann and Assistant City Manager Sergio Gonzalez.

The film chronicles the history of the Rialto, which was built in 1924 by noted architect Lewis A. Smith during the height of the Jazz Age. It was built as a Vaudeville theater to host both live and film shows, Feldmann noted.

An effort to demolish the theater in the 1960s was blocked by the Rialto gaining historical designation.

According to Gonzalez, the Rialto is a designated historical landmark in the national, state and local registries, which protects it from demolition.

"But that doesn't preclude anybody from neglecting the property and maybe it becomes demolition by neglect," Gonzalez says in the documentary.

Gontz said she made the film because she could not understand why or what was going on with such a prominent piece of property.

"I always wanted to know what had happen to this poor theater," she said. "It could be so much. It's dying and there are ways that we can save it."

The theater is essentially falling apart, Feldmann pointed out Wednesday. "It should be the city's hood ornament, instead it's a huge eyesore," he

said.

The Rialto is noticeably damaged from the exterior with faded paint, boarded-up windows and a cracked facade. In January 2010, a chunk of Rialto's plaster fell onto the sidewalk, prompting an investigation by city inspectors.

Gonzalez said the city can do little to enforce upkeep except when it endangers public safety.

According to city documents, the inspection revealed the theater lacked proper sprinkler systems, piping, fire alarms, emergency lighting, exits and roofing.

Feldmann said there is a question of responsibility involved in repairing the theater, which has been privately owned by the Jebbia family since the 1930s and leased to Landmark Theatres since 1976, according to public records.

Landmark took over a 99-year-lease which had a cheap rent locked in, and because the owner has never changed hands, cheap taxes, Feldmann noted.

The issue of who should have to make the repairs is a bit muddled. Landmark declined to comment on the situation. Phone calls to the Jebbia estate were not returned.

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"Should the owner have to pay or should Landmark - that's the question," Feldmann said. "It's a bit up in the air and it presents a number of problems because of the historical designation."

Replacing the windows, for example, would require expensive windows that are historically accurate. "Landmark is basically waiting out the lease," Feldmann added.

There is about a half-million in federal dollars, including a \$298,000 earmark from Rep. Adam Schiff, D-Pasadena, available for revitalization.

But the Jebbia estate has declined the funds repeatedly, according to Feldmann. And the cost could be in the millions for repairs.

"People are hoping that the owners change their minds," he said. "Or that we can come up with some solution."

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